

BEHOLD YOUR MOTHER



A Biblical and Historical Defense
of the Marian Doctrines



TIM STAPLES

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I

THE GREATEST OF ALL MARIAN TITLES



Theotokos, Greek for *God-bearer*, is the first and greatest of all Mary's titles and God's supreme gift to her—the foundation in the order of grace of all other Marian dogmas and doctrines. As the Council of Ephesus declared in 431:

If anyone does not confess that God is truly Emmanuel, and that on this account the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God (for according to the flesh she gave birth to the Word of God become flesh by birth), let him be anathema.”³

According to the council fathers, this Marian dogma presupposes what all Christians believe: Jesus Christ is God. Indeed, it is from this foundational truth that the *Theotokos* necessarily follows. If Jesus Christ is truly a divine person, then Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is the *Mother of God*.

This seems simple enough. And we should note here that for many in the more traditional Protestant communities, believing Mary to be the *Theotokos* is an area of *agreement* with Catholics. They may not see all of the theological implications involved, but they believe the basic truth that Mary truly is the Mother of God. Yet, for millions in Fundamentalist and Evangelical communities, it is a different story. Especially among Fundamentalists, this ancient teaching places Catholics in the same league with polytheists and idolaters.

3. Tanner, *The Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 59.

The objections most often come in two basic forms. First, we hear words to the effect that: “Nowhere in Sacred Scripture do we find the words ‘Mother of God’ used to describe Mary. If this doctrine were as important as Catholics claim, would not at least one of the inspired writers have used it?” Or, we hear: “It is impossible for God to have a mother. The very claim is blasphemy. If a dog gives birth to a dog, a cat to a cat, and a human to a human, Mary would have to be God in order to give birth to God!”

The Catholic Answer

In saying Mary cannot be the Mother of God because Scripture never explicitly describes her in those terms, Fundamentalists set a trap for themselves and their own beliefs. Where does the Bible say “all doctrines must be explicitly stated in the Bible?” Nowhere. And this is just the beginning of the difficulties. We would have to rule out a host of essential Christian doctrines that are also not declared in Scripture.

For example, all Christians believe in the Trinity. Yet, the word *Trinity* is not found in the Bible. The term *homousios*, used by the Council of Nicaea to define Christ’s shared divinity with the Father—and used by Catholics and non-Catholics alike—is not a biblical term. Christian theology concerning holy matrimony is not found explicit in Scripture, either. Is a couple married by the minister, or do they confect the sacrament between themselves in the presence of the minister? Is marriage a sacrament at all? Is a minister even necessary? Is the couple truly married at church, at the consummation, or could it be done in their living room with only God as their witness? These and other questions require more than the Bible to answer.

Ironically, even the canon of Scripture itself would also go up in smoke if we were to truly rely on Scripture alone. Where does Scripture tell us non-apostles like St. Luke, St. Mark or perhaps the inspired author of Hebrews could write inspired and inerrant Scripture? Where does the Bible tell us who wrote the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, Hebrews, Revelation, etc.? Or, as the

saying goes, “There is no divinely inspired table of contents *for* the Bible *in* the Bible.”

The truth is, all Christians rely upon Church Tradition as well as upon Scripture in order to articulate core Christian teachings. Indeed, the Bible itself tells us that we ought to do just that: “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thess. 2:15). Oral Tradition can never *contradict* Scripture. Indeed, one can argue that all dogma is found at least *implicitly* in Scripture. But to require Scripture alone as the sole rule of faith is not a historically Christian doctrine at all.

The real questions we need to ask are: 1. Does Scripture *contra-**dict* the teaching that Mary is the Mother of God? 2. Is the *concept* or *the essential truth* of Mary as Mother of God found in Sacred Scripture? And so we proceed . . .

What the Bible Says

Granted, the phrase “Mother of God” is not in Scripture, but we do have something synonymous in Luke 1:43, in the account of the Visitation of Mary to her much older relative Elizabeth. When Mary entered Elizabeth’s home and greeted her, Elizabeth “exclaimed with a loud cry: ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the *mother of my Lord* should come to me?’” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) explains:

Called in the Gospels “the mother of Jesus,” Mary is acclaimed by Elizabeth, at the prompting of the Spirit and even before the birth of her son, as “the mother of my Lord.” In fact, the One whom she conceived as man by the Holy Spirit, who truly became her Son according to the flesh, was none other than the Father’s eternal Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Hence, the Church confesses that Mary is truly “Mother of God” (495).

Biblical evidence for this dogma is not limited to the New Testament. St. Cyril of Jerusalem and the fathers of the Council of Ephesus referred to an intriguing prophecy from Isaiah 7:14 in their own exposition of both Jesus' divinity and Mary's divine maternity.

For the holy prophet Isaiah does not lie when he says, "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which is interpreted God with us."⁴

The Messiah was to be born of a woman, and yet he was to be called *Immanuel*, which means *God with us*. According to the council fathers, *God with us* means what it says: Jesus is God; so this prophetic virgin, Mary, would then be the Mother of God. Thus we have a text from the Old Testament that prophesied the mother of the Messiah was indeed to be the Mother of God. Add to that the text of Luke 1:43 and we have both the Old and New Testaments revealing the "Catholic" truth about Mary.

Lord vs. God

"Not so fast," say many among our Protestant friends. Jimmy Swaggart represents one among a chorus of voices who object to this historical Christian understanding. He presents quite a different take on Luke 1:43:

Here Elisabeth called Jesus "Lord" . . . *But once again it must be emphasized that it was not God that was born of Mary, it was the human child—the Lord Jesus Christ.*⁵

To be fair to Swaggart, the New Testament does use the term *lord* to denote authority figures or even things—e.g., idols that are obviously *not* the one, true God. In 1 Corinthians 8:5, for example,

4. Ibid., 71. This quote is taken from St. Cyril of Alexandria's "Letter to John of Antioch," which was incorporated into the "Formula of Union" adopted by the council fathers and ratified by the pope.

5. Swaggart, *Catholicism and Christianity*, 101.

St. Paul writes, “Indeed there are many gods and many lords.” This would indeed refer to *something* other than almighty God—a *lord*, instead of *the Lord*, if you will.⁶ Does Jimmy Swaggart have an argument here? Could *lord* here in Luke 1:43 refer to *humanity* rather than divinity with regard to Christ? This is not a point to dismiss lightly.

So how are we to know whether *lord* (Gr., *kurios*) refers to divinity or not? As is the case with all of biblical exegesis, *context* is key. And we need not go beyond the above-quoted 1 Corinthians 8:5 to find an excellent example of this truth. Paul’s words, “Indeed there are many gods and many lords,” are immediately followed by: “Yet to us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and for whom we exist, and *one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*”

Both the pagan and Jewish converts in Corinth would have immediately understood Paul’s carefully crafted words. Jesus is *the one Lord* in contrast to the “many [false] lords” worshipped in the surrounding pagan world. Thus, to these pagan converts, these words could hardly be plainer: Jesus is God. And his Jewish Christian readers would have been familiar with the great *sh’ma* of Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, therefore, O Israel, the Lord our God *is one Lord.*” When Paul refers to Jesus as *the one Lord*, his Jewish readers and listeners could have only one interpretation: Jesus is the one, almighty God of the *sh’ma*.

Moreover, considering that the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures—the Septuagint—used *kurios* in place of the unmentionable divine name YHWH throughout, the Jews were well accustomed to the usage of *lord* for divinity. Thus, when the context is understood, Paul is unequivocal: Jesus is *the one Lord, God almighty.*⁷

6. Cf. Liddel and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1013. The authors list numerous examples of *lord* (Gr., *kurios*) used in the sense of an earthly potentate, master, owner, or even *sir*. Cf. 1 Tim. 6:15, Matt. 21:40, Mark 6:21, John 12:21, etc.

7. We also note the definite connection between Jesus being “Lord” and his being creator as we also see in John 1:1–3. When 1 Corinthians 8:6 says “through whom all things exist,” or when John 1:3 tells us, “without him was not anything made that was made,”

Mother of the Lord God

The key to our discussion, then, is to ascertain how *kurios* is being used of Christ in Luke 1:43. Is it being used to describe Jesus with regard to his humanity alone, or with regard to his divinity? Let's take a look again at the text. When Elizabeth exclaims, "Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?," she refers to Jesus as Lord within a specific context. On the literal level, she calls Mary "*the mother of my Lord.*" Mothers give birth to *persons*, not *natures*. This alone would lead us to conclude Mary to be the Mother of God if we understand properly Jesus to be one, divine person. We will come back and speak more to this point below.

When we examine the spiritual sense of Elizabeth's usage of *mother of my Lord* there is even more reason to believe she is referring to Christ as a divine person. In declaring, "And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?," Elizabeth was referencing, almost verbatim, a text from 2 Samuel 6 in which we discover the Ark of the Covenant being brought into the newly conquered city of Jerusalem in triumphant procession. After having experienced a dramatic manifestation of the power of God at work in and through the ark, King David exclaimed, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" (2 Sam. 6:9).

With this reference, Elizabeth—*under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit*—suggests Mary is the *Ark of the New Covenant*. In Chapter 4 we will discuss this in more detail, but for now consider these parallels:

2 Samuel 6:16 presents King David *leaping* in the presence of *the ark*. Luke 1:41 tells how St. John the Baptist *leapt* in the womb of Elizabeth when *Mary* greeted her upon entering into her home.

we know we are talking about God, who in Scripture is revealed to be the creator of all things. Cf. Gen. 1:1, Isa. 44:24, 45:8, 12, etc.

2 Samuel 6:11 records that “the ark of the Lord abode in the house of Obededom the Gethite *three months*.” Luke 1:56 reveals that Mary “remained in the house of Elizabeth about *three months*.”

Further, recall the reason the Ark of the Covenant was believed to be surpassingly holy. It carried inside of it three holy objects:

1. A sample of the *manna*, the miraculous bread from heaven (Ex. 16).
2. The *Ten Commandments* (Ex. 20).
3. *Aaron’s rod* that miraculously sprouted blossoms (Num. 17).⁸

All three of these gifts given by God to Israel were *types* of Jesus Christ. Mary carried within her womb:

- The *true bread from heaven* (John 6:32).
- The *Word made flesh* (John 1:14).
- Our true *High Priest* (Heb. 3:1).

The parallels are unmistakable. Mary is revealed to have been graced by God to be the New Covenant Ark of the Covenant. And there is much that is revealed to us about Mary through this august title.⁹ But from the clear revelation here of Mary being *Mother of my Lord*, in the context of her being revealed to be the *Ark of the Lord God of Israel*, it necessarily follows that Mary is *Mother of God*.

8. Cf. Heb. 9:4.

9. It should be noted that titles like this carry with them well-known connotations from the Old Testament. Take Jesus’ statement in Mark 2:28, for example: “So the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” This title was packed with meaning for his first-century Jewish audience. “Lord of the Sabbath?” In Scripture, almighty God alone is revealed to be the *Lord of the Sabbath* (cf. Ex. 16:23, 25; 20:10; Deut. 5:14, etc.). Thus, Jesus reveals his divinity. As we will see here and in chapters to come, “Ark of the Covenant” is similarly packed with meaning.

The Decisive Question: Who Is Jesus?

For those who would deny that Mary is the Mother of God there is one devastating question: “Who is Jesus Christ?” If Mary is not the Mother of God, then to whom did she give birth? For Jimmy Swaggart, the answer is to say Mary gave birth to an earthly and human “lord” rather than God. Thus, we must again ask the question: “Who, then, is Jesus Christ?”

This discussion reminds me of a debate I had years ago with a “nondenominational” minister where the topics were diverse, but eventually got around to Mary. When I mentioned Mary as “Mother of God,” his face lit up and he vehemently objected. “God has no mother!” In front of the about 500 people in attendance, we had a dialogue that went something like this:

TIM: “So, you reject the doctrine of Mary as Mother of God?”

PASTOR BOB: “Absolutely, God has no mother!”

TIM: “Well, let me ask you this question, then. Is Jesus God?”

PASTOR BOB: “Absolutely, he is 100 percent God and 100 percent man!”

TIM: “Okay, good. Let me ask you another question. Was he God when he was a little boy, let’s say, of two years?”

PASTOR BOB: “Absolutely!”

TIM: “Good. We agree. Was he God when Mary was six months pregnant with him and he was living in her womb?”

PASTOR BOB: “Yes, he was God from the moment of his conception!”

TIM: “Was he God when he was coming out of the womb of Mary at his birth?”

PASTOR BOB: He responded a bit slower and softer at this point, but after a brief pause he said, “Yes, he was God then, too.”

TIM: “Was Mary, then, the Mother of God?”

At this point there was a long and deafening silence, which Pastor Bob broke by exclaiming, “No, she is not the Mother of God! She is the mother of the man, Jesus Christ!”

A New Nestorianism

Pastor Bob's rejection of Mary as Mother of God was rooted, as was my own when I was Protestant, in a lot of misunderstanding and anti-Catholic bias built up over years. But rejecting Mary as *Theotokos* inevitably results in one of three serious Christological errors:

1. Denial of the divinity of Christ.
2. Creation of two persons to represent Jesus Christ, one human and one divine.
3. The "unintelligible Christology" of which Fr. John Hardon, S.J., wrote.

If Mary didn't give birth to God, she must have given birth to *a mere human person*, as the first two of the above-mentioned errors claim. The first is the error of Arianism, named after its fourth-century Alexandrian founder, the infamous priest and archheretic Arius. He and all who follow in his footsteps deny Jesus is God and thus cease to be Christian at all. This error lives today in quasi-Christian sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Iglesia Ni Cristo, among others. We have already presented an antidote, albeit briefly, to this false teaching when we demonstrated the truth concerning Christ's divinity.

The second position is where we want to focus our attention now, because it represents a rebirth of the ancient heresy of Nestorianism, and is, unfortunately, alive and well in popular Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christianity today.

Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople from 428 to 431, was excommunicated by Pope Celestine and the Council of Ephesus for denying that Mary was the Mother of God. The crux of his error is found in his claim that in Christ there are *two persons* with a *moral union* rather than *two natures* with a *hypostatic union*.¹⁰

10. There is a real question among theologians today as to whether Nestorius actually taught "Nestorianism." We would argue he did, but the point is both debatable and beyond the scope of this book. From here forward I will refer to the teaching condemned by

This view radically divides Christ's humanity and divinity to the point of presenting an all-but-incoherent Christology. When we speak to Jesus are we speaking to *two subjects*? Would Jesus speak to himself as two subjects? "Good morning, divine Jesus, how are you?" "I'm well, thank you human Jesus . . ."

The Catholic and biblical position teaches Jesus Christ to be one person—*one subject*—to whom two natures both distinctly belong: one divine and one human. The natures of Christ are joined in his one, divine *hypostasis*, or *person*, without being commingled or divided. This union is thus called the *hypostatic union*.¹¹ It is the same divine person, Jesus Christ, who speaks and acts as both God and man.

In denying Mary to be the true Mother of God, millions of our Protestant friends who believe Mary gave birth to the *man*, Jesus Christ, and not God, end up in agreement—though often unwittingly—with the Nestorian heresy. Some will proceed to divide the events in Christ's life, claiming the *divine* Christ did some of his acts and the *human* Christ did others. Very commonly, we find the claim among Fundamentalists that the *human* Christ died, not the *divine*. Some will even claim only the *divine* Christ healed; or that we worship the *divine* Jesus but never the *man* Jesus.¹²

Cyril and the fathers of the Council of Ephesus referred to a host of scriptures to demonstrate the error of the Nestorians and all those who radically divide the actions and person of Christ.

the Church proposing there to be two persons in Christ as Nestorianism. We will not attempt to deal with the question of Nestorius himself.

11. The term *hypostatic* is rooted in the Greek word *hypostasis*, which means *nature* or *being*. It came to be used as *person*. *Persona*, in Latin, is a more precise word for *person* because *hypostasis*, in its original and ancient usage, could refer to the nature of a dog or cat as well as man. It did not have the connotation of an *individual substance of a rational nature* that *persona* does. That is why St. Jerome was not comfortable with its use as a reference to the *persons* of the Trinity or the *person* of Christ. However, *hypostatic union* came to be defined as the union of the two natures of Christ *in the one person* or *hypostasis* of Christ. And *hypostasis* came to be understood and used as synonymous with the Latin *persona*.
12. This is a minority opinion that I encountered in my days in the Assemblies of God. You will find it among a smattering of folks in Evangelical, Fundamentalist, and Pentecostal circles.

Fr. Valentine Long, O.F.M., sums up nicely what one finds in the conciliar decrees:

St. Cyril had a wide choice of utterances from our blessed Lord to rely upon. Never once in the Gospels did Christ, who in word and deed revealed his two natures, speak as two persons. It was “Young man, I say to you, arise,” and not “the God in me” says so. He did not ask the blind men before their instantaneous cure, “Do you believe my divine omnipotence can do this?” No, it was simply; “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” Dying on the cross, the Savior did not cry out that his human nature thirsted. His words were, “I thirst.” His divinity worked miracles; his humanity needed to eat and drink and sleep, but the “I” of his assertions, which admitted both natures, allowed no duality of person. “The Father and I are one” and “The Father is greater than I” are expressions of the same undivided person.¹³

Anyone who maintains belief in the divinity of Christ and yet attempts to say Mary is the mother of the man Jesus but not the divine Jesus creates two persons in Christ. And this simply cannot be. The Bible says, “*In him* the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9) and “*in him* all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” (Col. 1:16). There is never a case of *in them* with reference to Christ. The subject of both the human and divine natures is always the same “he.”

The seriousness of this error cannot be overstated because, between these two positions, we are ultimately talking about *different Christs*. Paul’s words to to the Corinthians come to mind:

For if someone comes and preaches another Jesus than the one we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough (2 Cor. 11:4).

13. Long, *The Mother of God*, 25.

Imagine if someone were to come up to you and excitedly exclaim, “I’ve met Jesus, and he’s changed my life. I want you to meet him, too!” “Great!” you respond. “I would like to meet him as well!” Suppose this someone were then to say, “He’s right down the street over here. He’s a Hispanic fellow, so be sure to pronounce his name *Hey-soos* when you speak to him.” Folks, no matter how excited someone may be about meeting this man named Jesus, *this* Jesus would not have the power to save anyone. He is the wrong Jesus! Only the true Jesus has the power to save. That is why it is crucial for us to get the *right* Jesus in our Christology. And getting the right Mary helps us to get the right Jesus.

A Faulty Syllogism

But what about the oft-posed objection presented at the beginning of this chapter: “If a dog gives birth to a dog, a cat to a cat, a human to a human, Mary would have to be God in order to give birth to God!” How do we respond?

This question always brings to mind a debate I watched back in the eighties on the *John Ankerberg Show*, a Protestant television broadcast, between Walter Martin and Fr. Mitch Pacwa. Still a Protestant at the time, I was rooting for Martin—then one of the leading Evangelical apologists in the world and a mentor of mine.

During the debate Martin made the classic blunder of claiming that Mary was the mother of Jesus’ human nature only, and so could not be called *Mother of God*. As part of his argument he presented the classic syllogism used by the Church for well over a millennium and a half:

Major premise: Jesus is God

Minor premise: Mary is the mother of Jesus

Conclusion: Mary is the Mother of God

But then he presented another syllogism that in his mind followed *necessarily* from the first, and one that if held would prove devastating to New Testament theology:

Major premise: God is Trinity

Minor premise: Mary is the mother of God

Conclusion: Mary is the mother of the Trinity

I can remember thinking, as I watched the debate, “Yeah, Pacwa, explain that one away!”

In his response, Fr. Pacwa explained that Mary is only the mother of the *second person* of the Blessed Trinity incarnate, because the Father and the Holy Spirit did not become incarnate. In his syllogism, Martin had fallen prey to the logical fallacy of the *undistributed middle term*. The term “God” in the title “Mother of God” must be clarified—distributed properly—as referring *only* to the second person of the Blessed Trinity, who *is* God but who *isn’t* the Trinity.

When we say *God*, we may be referring to all three persons of the Blessed Trinity, but not necessarily so. The three persons in the Trinity are distinct within the eternal relations, so we can speak of them individually. Thus, we can say Mary is only the Mother of the *second person* of the Trinity. But we must also remember that the three persons share the same divine nature; hence, they are each fully God. There are not three Gods, nor are there “parts” with God. He is absolutely one in essence or nature. Thus, we can say Mary is simply the *Mother of God*.

This point of confusion is relatively simple to clear up, but our Protestant friends might still perceive an apparent weakness in our argument, as Walter Martin did during the debate. Even if Mary is only the mother of the second person of the Blessed Trinity, he (the second person of the Trinity) is just as eternal as the other two divine persons. Mary, Protestants might say, would still have to be eternal in order to be his mother. Thus, we really haven’t answered the objection that in order to give birth to God, Mary would have to *be* God.

Yet the Catholic Church does not say Mary is the source of the divine nature of the second person of the Blessed Trinity. That would be both heretical and absurd. But it does not then follow that she cannot be his mother.

We can use the example of normal human reproduction to help clarify this point. When a man and wife have a child, they are not the source of the child's immortal soul. God, the source of all life, directly creates each individual soul.¹⁴ However, we do not conclude from this that the mother is merely the mother of the *body* of the child. Instead she is the mother of a whole *person* who is a body/soul composite.

Analogously, though Mary did not provide Jesus with either his divine nature or his immortal human soul, she was more than the mother of a body. Mary, like any other mother, gave birth to a person; and that person is God.

So What?

The Martin/Pacwa debate took an unexpected turn when John Ankerberg actually *agreed* with Fr. Pacwa that Mary was the Mother of God. This made for interesting television! In reply Ankerberg said words to the effect of: "So, she's the Mother of God, so what?" What, he wanted to know, was the big deal?

Ankerberg came to acknowledge the truth that Mary is the Mother of God, but like so many Protestants, did not recognize the biblical implications that flow from this essential Christian teaching. He objected to what he perceived as the "Mary worship" that flows from the Catholic understanding of Mary's divine maternity; he objected to Catholics' calling Mary the "Mother of the Church."

Of course, Catholics do not adore Mary as if she were God, but we *do* believe that being the Mother of God entitles Mary to a unique place of honor in the Church. In the next chapter we'll see why the title of *Theotokos* is such a big deal when we examine the problems inherent in its rejection.

14. Cf. Eccles. 12:7.